

[By Katie Beth Ryan, Valley News](#)

White River Junction -- U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, Vermont's sole voice in the House of Representatives, acknowledged yesterday afternoon that the discussion on health care reform has taken a different tone in the Green Mountain State than it has in other parts of the country.

"There is a broad sense in Vermont that everyone should have health care," Welch told an audience at Hartford High School. "That is not the universal point of view in Congress," he added.

Welch outlined his desired results from the health care overhaul proposals being weighed in Congress. He said he backs strong insurance reform that would bring an end to lifetime maximum benefits and prevent insurers from denying pre-existing conditions, as well as an extension of coverage to more than 37 million uninsured Americans. "Everyone would be covered, but everyone would help pay," said Welch.

Welch also called a public health care option "an essential step that's going to empower the American family to make a choice, and it's going to force the insurance companies to play fair and not rip off the consumer," a statement that met with applause from many in the Hartford High auditorium, but also elicited some audible boos.

The first audience member to speak yesterday, Lori Dickerson of Hartford, addressed the question looming over the health care debate: how to pay for it. Dickerson said that she was wary of the growing federal deficit, which she believes will worsen with large-scale health reform.

"How are we really going to pay for all of this?" Dickerson asked. "Everything run by this government always costs more than the original budget," she said.

Welch insisted that he backed President Obama's call to not support any health care legislation

that would increase the national deficit. Instead, he said, measures like pushing for savings on prescription drugs and negotiating premium reductions on Medicare programs would pay for the measure, while increasing health care coverage across the board.

While many came to voice their opposition to legislation proposed by both the Senate Finance and Health committees, others felt that neither measure will go far enough in making sure that more uninsured Americans have health coverage.

Sarah Weintraub of Burlington, a supporter of a public option, said she felt the current proposals give too much away to insurance companies.

"There's really not any room for profit in health care. When there's profit in health care, that creates an inherent conflict of interest," said Weintraub, who added that the legislation authored in Congress "doesn't really get people who care more about profit out of our health care system."

Rob Leitschuh of Thetford, meanwhile, thought the United States could model its health care reform after government-run models in other nations.

"Why can't we follow something that's already out there?" he asked. "Why do we have to reinvent the wheel?"

Several small business owners in the audience said they were burdened by the high cost of providing health care for their employees.

Kenny Keith of Hartland, who owns Justin Companies Inc. in White River Junction, said he spends \$80,000 a year in worker compensation costs, which he said makes it cost-prohibitive to purchase health care for his employees. He said he supports insurance reform that would "put every insurance company on a level playing field," but called the current push to health care reform "a sledgehammer approach."

"The insurance companies have been carrying this country for 50 years," said Keith. "People live longer than they ever have."

"The drugs are good. The care is outstanding. You've got to get back to how you're going to pay for it," Keith said of reform.

Welch said evidence in favor of a public option was buoyed by a recent Congressional Budget Office report stating that a public option will provide the biggest savings in the long term. Still, he stopped short of the pledge Vermont Sens. Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders made to not vote for any legislation that didn't include a public option.

"I don't sign pledges. I have two responsibilities to you as your representative," he said. "One is to fight every day that I can to get the best possible health care for Vermont and our country." The other, he said, is to use his best judgment in making decisions about health care legislation.

After the meeting, Welch said the so-called Baucus Bill, authored by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, was "deeply flawed."

"It's too insurance company-friendly and it's not going to provide more affordable access going forward," he said. Instead, he said, he preferred several proposals going through the House, and said he hasn't given up hope for a bill that includes a public option eventually reaching the House floor.